

**ISSN** INTERNATIONAL  
STANDARD  
SERIAL  
NUMBER  
**ISSN-2321-7065**

**IJELLH**

**International Journal of English Language,  
Literature in Humanities**

Indexed, Peer Reviewed (Refereed), UGC Approved Journal



**Volume 7, Issue 2, February 2019**

[www.ijellh.com](http://www.ijellh.com)

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A Portrayal of the Plights of the Second Generation Immigrants in the Select Novels of

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni- A Study

### **ABSTRACT**

The Second Generation Immigrants are the immigrant people who were born and brought up in a foreign land. They are facing various problems due to identity crisis as they were left between two worlds. They are in dilemma whether they belong to their native land or the host land. They consider themselves a citizen of their host land and they are ready to embrace its culture. But the problem arises when they confront with the native people where

they treat them as others. Identity crisis is the major issue faced by the second generation immigrants. Second generation immigrants suffer due to double consciousness, sense of unbelongingness, identity crisis, marginalization, etc. The present study focuses on the life of the second generation immigrants portrayed in the novels *The Mistress of Spices*, *Queen of Dreams* and *Before We Visit the Goddess* of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni.

**KeyWords: Second Generation Immigrants, identity crisis, uprootedness, dilemma.**

"Death end things but it can be a beginning too" (*Queen of Dreams* 1).

The term 'Diaspora' is the combination of the words *Dia* and *Spora* which means scatter across. It refers to the displaced communities of people who have dislocated from their native homeland through migration, immigration or exile. There are two types of migrations. One is voluntary migration and the other one is compelled migrations. During colonial rule people were forced to migrate to different countries to serve for their colonizer. Voluntary migration happens with the willingness of the people themselves. According to the latest survey, Indian Americans are among the fastest growing immigrant groups in America and they are the largest ethnic group in America after Chinese and Philippines.

The second generation immigrants are the second generation of a family to inhabit in a foreign land, but the first natively born in a country. There are a lot of ambiguities existing even in addressing the second generation immigrants who are born and brought up in the new land have at least one foreign-born parent or the very young-born children of immigrants who are raised in that country. Identity crisis is the major problem faced by the immigrants. The second generation immigrants suffer much than first generation immigrants. The second generation immigrants undergo a psychic trauma due to double consciousness, sense of unbelongingness, loneliness, nostalgia, identity crisis, racial discriminations, marginalization, etc.

Indian Literature is one among the greatest literatures of the world. Indian writing in English, which emerged after the colonialism, has gained a unique place in Postcolonial English Literature. Diasporic experience is one of the important themes dealt with in the postcolonial writings. In the last three decades, women writers have enjoyed being in lime light in Indian English literature. Their writings serve as the voice for the problems faced by women and the disadvantaged sections in society. Some of the eminent contemporary writers are Shashi Deshpande, Bharathi Mukerjee, Arundhati Roy, Manju Kapur, Kiran Desai, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Preethi Nair etc. Other than women issues, these prominent women writers also portrays the plights of immigrants, uprootedness, sense of loss, nostalgia, etc through their writings.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a famous Indo- American Woman Diasporic Writer. Her writings narrates the struggles in the life of the immigrants (American Immigrants). Her novel, *The Mistress of Spices* portrays the life and the plights of immigrants who are living in America. *Queen of Dreams* is the second novel of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni which vividly presents the problems faced by the diasporic people in their adopted land. *Before We Visit the Goddess* is the recently published novel of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, which deals with the problems of the immigrants in a foreign land.

*The Mistress of Spices*, debut novel written by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni was published in 1997 and was nominated for Orange Prize. It was written in culinary fiction, and magical realism genres. This novel focuses on the life of immigrant people especially, the life of the second generation immigrants and their difficulties in fixing their identity in an alien land. Tilo, the protagonist of the novel belongs to India, is running a spice bazaar in California. She has the ability of sensing the mystical power of spices and she can also sense the problems of her customers. Coincidentally, most of them are immigrants living in America from various countries. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni says, “I wrote in a spirit of play,

collapsing the division between the realistic world of 20<sup>th</sup> century America and the timeless one of myth and magic in my attempt to create a modern fable”. This novel also pictures the internal urge of people in finding themselves along with their personal responsibilities and social relationship.

*Queen of Dreams* is another culinary novel authored by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. It was published in the year 2003. It is also a magical realistic novel that deals with the in-between status and stage of the second generation immigrants and the role of dreams in the life of the people. It also sheds light on the complexities faced between the mother and the daughter. It talks about the fascination the second generation immigrants have on their native land.

*Before We Visit The Goddess* was published in 2016. It is about mother and daughter relationship and their interlinked identity. It revolves around the characters Sabtiri, Bela, and Tara and their struggles in forming their identity. It exposes the misunderstanding in the family relationship, especially, about the conflicts in mother daughter relationship. It also records the role of culinary skill in empowering women and it shows that the art of cooking is a bringer of solace.

Everyone in the world wants to live and establish his or her identity. Creating an identity for oneself requires a lots of skills. People living in the host land suffer and strive for their identity. The experience of identity crisis varies between the first generation immigrants and second generation immigrants. The first generation know very well about their homeland, its culture and its practices. The second generation immigrants had never been to the native place. Things they know about their native places are only through stories they listen to about their homelands which are highly distanced from the reality. Rakhi says: I would have preferred the stories to have come from my mother, and to have been set in India, where she

grew up, a land that seemed to me to be shaded with the unending mystery (*Queen of Dreams* 4). They usually live in a fantasy that they belong to their host land. For example, the second generation immigrant women like Rakhi in *Queen of Dreams*, Tara in *Before We Visit the Goddess* and Bougainville girls in *The Mistress of Spices* consider themselves Americans because they were born in America. Tara says, "India! The word surges inside me like a wave" (*Before We Visit The Goddess* 68). Since they were born and brought up in a foreign land they didn't have any acquaintance with their native land. "I must be proud like Mother says to be Indian; I wish for that American skin that American hair those blue American eyes so that no one will stare at me except to say WOW". ( *The Mistress of Spices*, 63) The difference in the attitude of the first generation immigrants and the second generation immigrants is cleverly brought out in the above quote. The second generation immigrants don't know the reality of their ancestral land and its day to-day life. It is only a land of fantasy for them. Whereas, the first Generation immigrants were deeply rooted in their native. Rakhi says, "Belle had told me that her parents – and the parents of the other desis she knew-loved to go on and on about India, which in their opinion was as close to paradise as you could get" (*Queen of Dreams* 82).

The second generation immigrants were completely assimilated to the new culture but their family members, even though they were also immigrants, were not assimilated to the foreign culture. In *The Mistress of Spices* Geeta is the best example. Geeta, living in America gets her cut hair short and wasn't accepted by her grandfather. He wants her to live like an Indian though they live in America. He says:

That Geeta, how much make up her is using all the time. *Uff*, in my days only the Englishwomen and prostitutes are doing that. Good Indian girls are not ashamed of the face God is giving them. You can't think what all she is taking with her even to work. ( *The Mistress of Spices* 86).

However the second generation immigrants have completely assimilated the American life, though the Americans consider them as aliens. When they come to face the harsh reality that although they were born and brought up in America they are not belonging to America. They feel like fish out of water. In *Before We Visit the Goddess* Tara was hired by her manager as a car driver to the Indian tourist Mr. Venkatachalapathi as she was an Indian. In that situation Tara utters: I wanted to tell her, no, I wouldn't. I was certain this person – whoever he might be – was nothing like me. I'd never been to India, I didn't hang with Indians, I didn't think of myself as Indian. And even if I had, no two Indians were just like each other". (BWVG 120). When she went to the temple with Dr. Venkatachalapathi, a priest from India sees her like "You can't fool me. You don't belong *here*. (BWVG 122). The word 'here' refers to India. They can neither be a complete American nor be a complete Indian. This sort of incompleteness puts them in the ultimate dilemma.

Food is an important thing which resembles the culture and the traditional practices of a country. Jonathan Safran Foer says, "Food is not rational. Food is culture, habit, craving and identity"( Foer, 1). It is an effective symbol of nostalgia for the first generation immigrant people. The First generation immigrants love to eat their native food. They are supposed to adapt to the food style of the immigrant country due to lack of availability of ingredients. Whereas, the second generation immigrants are used to the host habit of eating. Fusion cooking is the product of diasporic cooking method. Immigrant people fuse their native style of cooking with the new one. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni in *Queen of Dreams* has portrayed the difference in the food habits of the first generation immigrants and the second generation immigrants. Belle, who was born and brought up in America, was already used to the American way of having food like muffins, chocolate chips, lemon glazed danishes and crumby sugar and cinnamon cookies. She is not at all aware of Indian food items. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni puts, it in the line "Belle, you don't know how to



make roti, Indian food, for that matter. And i have never seen you wearing anything remotely resembling a salwaar kameez”( *Queen of Dreams* 27). In another situation Rakhi’s mother feels very strange to hear Rakhi’s fondness for Indian food and she says, “Since when did you start wanting to eat my Indian food countered my mother, who believes in offensive play. ‘It was always pasta and pizza and *oh mom , not alu parathas again!* When you were growing up”” ( *Queen of Dreams* 31). Through their food habits and cooking their alienness towards the practices of their native countries can be witnessed. The second generation immigrants easily accepts the food items of their host land and sometimes they do not know about the native food and cooking. In *Mistress of Spices* Bougainvillea girls approached Tilo to know about the Indian recipe for their competition. Even though the first generation immigrants had accepted and adopted to live in the new land, the influence of their native is inflicted within them. Its reflection can be witnessed in their daily activities. “At home we rarely ate anything but Indian. That was the one way my mother kept her culture”( *Queen of Dreams* 7) The second generation immigrants had nothing to influence them from their native land. They are brought up with mentality as they were belonging to their immigrant country. They start to embrace the host way of life. But it causes them a lot of problems in their lives. They face troubles in conveying their decision in the family. Geeta in *The Mistress of Spices* wants to marry a Chicano and was not accepted by her family members even they were also immigrants. The reason for this entire dilemma of the second generation immigrants is due to their uprootedness.

Once the second generation immigrants came to feel about their otherness in the society they live, they start to realize their trishanku state i.e. they neither belong to their native nor to the host land. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni in her novels has very beautifully portrayed the psychological dilemma of the second generation immigrants when they are supposed to acquaint with their denial in the land which they so far thought as their native. In



*Queen of Dreams* Rakhi, Belle, and Jespal Singh consider themselves as a children of America. After the bang of World Trade Center by terrorist emergency situations prevails in California. When Rakhi, and Belle decide to open their shop at that moment, Mr. Soto, the owner of the next door restaurant advises them to put up a flag in the front. Belle says, “I don’t have to put up a flag to prove that I’m American. I’m American already. I love this country – hell, it’s the only country I know. But I’m not going to be pressured into putting up a sign to announce that love to every passerby” (*Queen of Dreams* 264) But they are put in an ultimate shock when four men burst into their shop and attacked them and thinking them as terrorists. Jespal Singh innocently says, “We’re Americans, just the way you are” (*Queen of Dreams* 267). But the response came for them from the attackers' side haunts them like a nightmare and shake their idea of themselves. The attackers reply “you ain’t no American. It’s fuckers like you who planned this attack on the innocent people of this country. Time someone taught you faggots a lesson” (*Queen of Dreams* 267). This upsets Rakhi and arises a question within her. She reveals her agitation by saying “But if I wasn’t American, then what was I ?” (*Queen of Dreams* 271).

The second generation immigrants are usually portrayed as rebellious ones. Geeta in *The Mistress of Spices*, and Rakhi in *Queen of Dreams* seem to be the rebellious persons. They struggle a lot to fixing the problems both in the family and in the society. They suffer out of identity crisis in the new land. They start to find out their roots. Their interest towards their native increases on witnessing small things they come across in the host land which serves as the symbol of their native. The search for their roots is very well portrayed through the characters in the novels *The Mistress of Spices*, *Queen of Dreams* and *Before We Visit the Goddess* of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. In *Before We Visit the Goddess* the photograph of Sabtiri, Tara’s grandmother kindles Tara’s emotions for her native. In *Queen of Dreams*, Rakhi says, “I hungered for all things Indian because my mother never spoke of the country

she'd grown up in – just as she never spoke of her past”( *Queen of Dreams* 70). The usage of the word ‘hungered’ wonderfully exposes the longing of the second generation immigrants for their native land. Even though they want to rely on one or the other land the fact is that they are already put in the third world. They have to accept their state. They have to come out from identifying themselves in the strangers’ point of view. They are forced in the situation to create an identity for themselves only with the help of their unique talents. Their uniqueness helps them acquire the identity they long for. Awareness and the acquaintance to the reality is only thing which can help them forge identity and to live in peace. The second generation immigrants are unknowingly trapped into a critical situation. They must face it boldly. Integration is the only thing which can bring peace in the life of the second generation immigrants. Unity and confidence among the second generation immigrants would help them to make a meaningful identity for themselves.

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